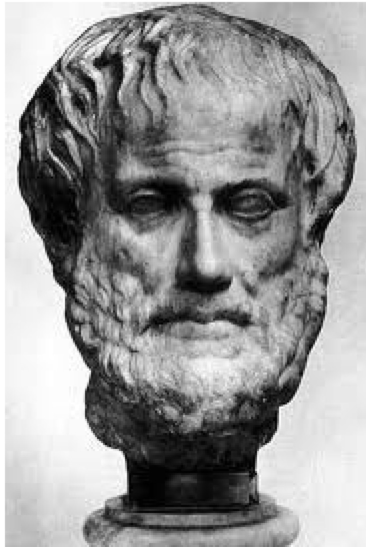
Aristotle on Tragedy

Since the days of ancient Greece, tragedy has been regarded as the highest form of literary art. But what is tragedy? Many definitions have been offered, but the most influential is the one presented by the philosopher Aristotle in his work entitled



Poetics. Having read *Oedipus the King*, to which Aristotle frequently refers, you might now consider his definition of tragedy—not because it is the final word on the subject, but because it contains fundamental ideas with which all later definitions of tragedy must come to terms.

In the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents his definition:

Tragedy . . . is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament . . . in the form of

action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.
Aristotle then goes on to explain his definition. Let us examine his explanation.
First of all, let us clarify several phrases. By “a certain magnitude” Aristotle refers to the scope of the action in a tragedy. There must be a convincing chain of events to change a given situation from good to bad fortune. In the phrase “language embellished” he indicates that tragedy should be expressed in poetry. And when he speaks of “the form of action, not of narrative,” he means that the lines must be acted, not simply read.

Tragedy, according to Aristotle, is an *imitation*. It is not life itself; it is life imitated on a stage. Moreover, it is an imitation of an *action*, not merely a revelation of character, although character is expressed through action. Thus he regards the plot, “the structure of the incidents,” as the most important part of a tragedy. Indeed, he tells us, “the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.”

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An effective plot, we are told, will be both “complete” and “complex.” By “complete,” Aristotle refers to the order of incidents. The plot must have “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” That is, the beginning must be understandable without knowledge of earlier incidents and must lead naturally to what follows; the middle must follow from the beginning and point toward the end, and the end must follow naturally from what has gone before and conclude the action. Elementary, perhaps, but these are the requirements for a well-constructed plot.

The plot should also be complex. A simple plot is one that moves in a straight line directly toward a conclusion. A complex plot is on that moves in various directions by means of what Aristotle calls *reversal* and *recognition*. *Reversal* “is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite”—as in *Oedipus the King*, where the accuser becomes the accused and the prosecutor becomes the defendant. *Recognition* “is a change from ignorance to knowledge.” This, too, can affect the direction of the plot, as when Oedipus comes to realize who he actually is. According to Aristotle, these shifts in direction increase the tragic effect of the drama.
The word *serious* in the first line of Aristotle’s definition refers both to the quality of the action and the characters involved. The action must end unhappily, but to be properly tragic it must have profound consequences involving people whose fate affects many beyond themselves. We may infer that Aristotle would find sadness in the death of a child in an automobile accident or of a policeman shot down in the line of duty, but he would not find these events tragic. Only in something as monumental as the assassination of a President, which alters all our lives, would he find the stuff of tragedy.
In Aristotle’s day the appropriate tragic figure would be a king, but he must be one whose fate would excite feelings of pity and fear in the audience. Thus a virtuous man whose fortune changes from prosperity to adversity will not do. Such a fall merely shocks us. Nor is the fall of an evil man properly tragic. Such a fall can please our moral sense, but it does not create the effect of tragedy. The proper tragic figure, then, is one who is neither evil nor

extremely virtuous, one “whose misfortune,” in the words of Aristotle, “is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.”

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Finally, Aristotle tells us, tragedy should arouse “pity and fear” through which it accomplishes “its catharsis of such emotions.” The subject matter of tragedy is painful. Characters make mistakes, suffer, and are destroyed in various ways. Yet audiences regard tragedy as the highest form of theatrical experienced. Why is this so? That was the question Aristotle asked himself and his definition attempts to answer it.

Aristotle speaks constantly of pity and fear—the pity we feel for the tragic character and the fear that his fate arouses in us. The pity is obvious, and we fear that what can happen to him can also happen to us. But what makes the experience bearable, even exhilarating? According to Aristotle, great tragedy provokes those feelings so strongly that the audience expends its emotions in the theater and leaves having been purged of them at least temporarily.

In daily life we live constantly with occasions that evoke pity and fear—auto wrecks, deaths by cancer, wars, all the personal and social disasters that fill newspapers week after week. These events do not create the effect of tragedy that Aristotle speaks of, but once in a long while, we may be lucky enough to see represented on stage a structuring of disaster that purges our pity and fear, allowing us to depart more buoyantly that we had entered. Hence those feelings of exhilaration, even exaltation, that many have testified to experiencing in the presence of supreme tragic art when superlatively performed.

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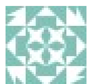

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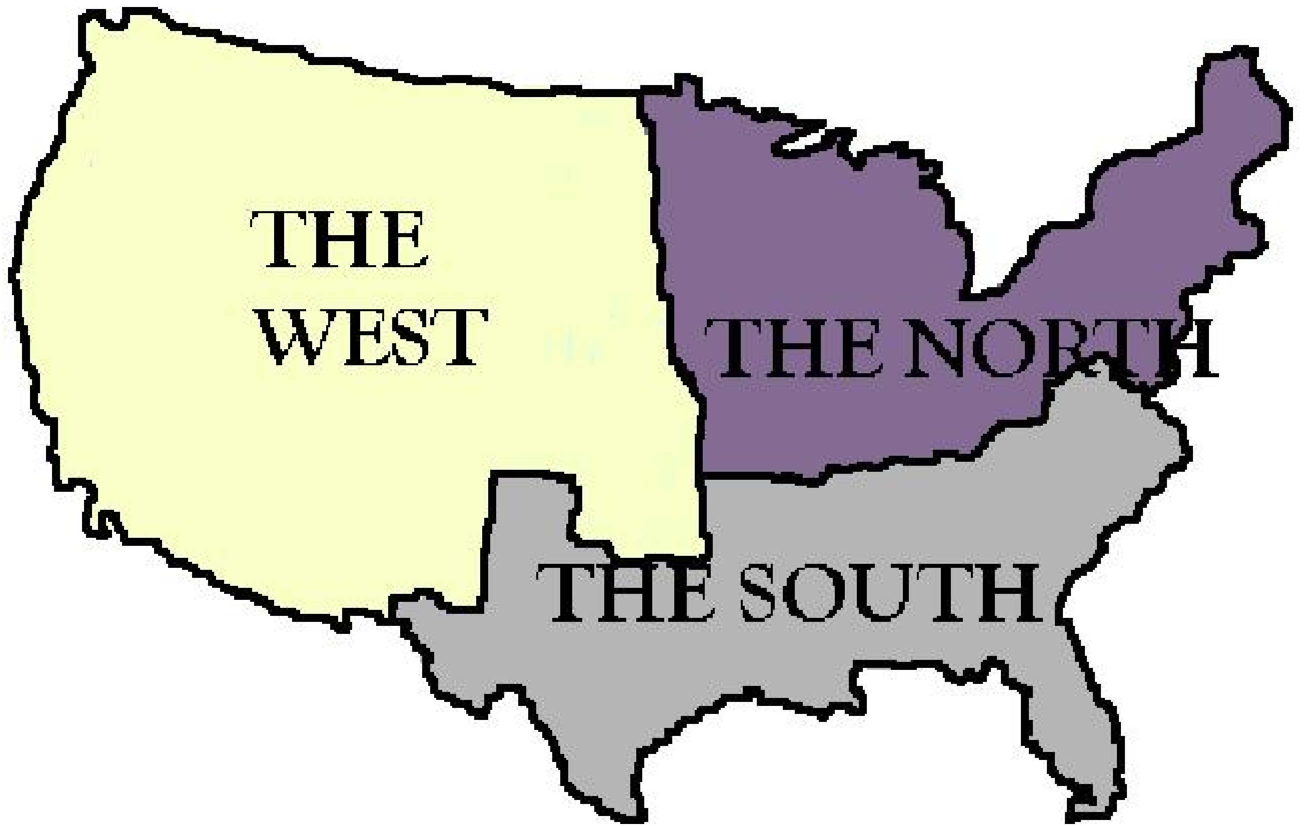

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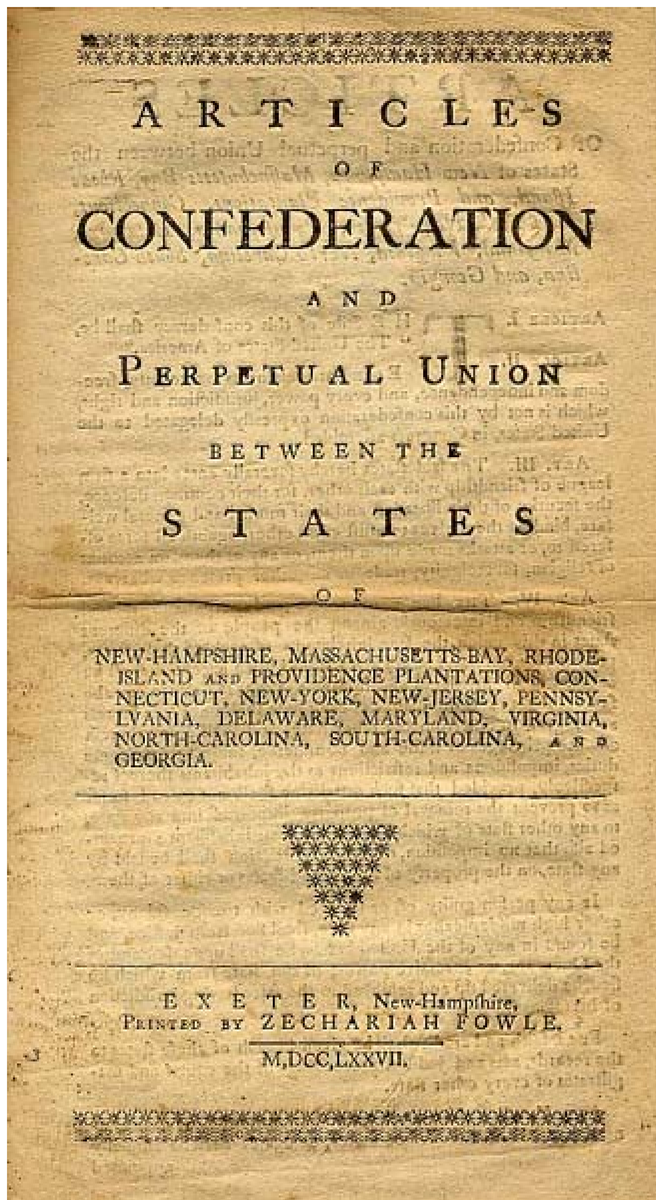

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